

the trial in existence. The only thing I could find at the courthouse was the order for John Hardy's execution."

The order is as follows: —  
State of W. Va.

vs.

John Hardy.  
Felony.

This day came again the State by her attorney and the Prisoner who stands convicted of murder in the first degree was again brought to the bar of the Court in custody of the Sheriff of this County; and thereupon the Prisoner being asked by the Court if anything he had or could say why the Court should not proceed to pass the sentence of the law upon him in accordance with the verdict of the jury impanelled in this cause, and the Prisoner saying nothing why such sentence should not be passed upon him by the Court; It is therefore considered by the Court that the Prisoner John Hardy, is guilty as found by the verdict of the jury herein and that the said John Hardy be hanged by the neck until he is dead, and that the Sheriff of the County, on Friday the 19th day of January 1894, take the said John Hardy from the jail of the County to some suitable place to be selected by him in this County and there hang the said John Hardy by the neck until he is dead, and the prisoner is remanded to jail.

The following statement was given by Mr. W. T. Tabor to Mr.

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"John Hardy: Negro, about forty years of age; black in color; from Virginia; worked as miner in coal-fields; had no family as known; killed another Negro in a crap game over 75 cents; another Negro named Guggins helped him escape and tried to wrest gun from sheriff to shoot, but both men were captured and returned to Welch. Guggins was given a life term for attempt to kill sheriff.

"Hardy hung in '94 in present courthouse yard, though not such at the time. At time of execution some white man in the crowd started a panic by yelling, 'O Lordy! O Lordy!' Officers had to jail some twenty-five or thirty men before execution could safely be concluded. Hardy lies buried in Woodmont addition to town of Welch."

The statement of R. L. Johnson, constable, who helped arrest Hardy, as compiled by Mr. Charles V. Price, shorthand reporter at Welch, W. Va., from a conversation between Johnson and Judge Herndon, was sent to me in the early part of the year 1917. It follows: —

“I was at Keystone the morning that Hardy killed this fellow, but I couldn't tell you the fellow's name now. They were shooting craps at Shawnee camp, and he was crap-shooting, and Webb Gudgin was behind a rock with a Winchester, and it is supposed that if Hardy didn't get the man that he was there with a Winchester to get him. After he was killed they sent to Keystone, and me and Tom Campbell went down there to search the camps; and while we were searching the camps they said, ‘Yonder they go, down the road!’ and we got on the railroad and followed them to the old bridge below Shawnee, and they turned up the hollow, and I says, ‘We will follow them up there.’ Tom says, ‘No, we can't follow them in the woods; they have got a Winchester, as good a gun as we have got.’ So we went back and decided to watch the trains. Me and some one, I think it was



Harvey Dillon, was watching Northfork station. They got on the train at Grover, and they got them; and when they went to handcuff Hardy, Gudgin was walking through the coaches, and every one went out to get Gudgin, and he made to jerk John off the train; but John held to him till they got the train stopped, and they sent a colored fellow back there to help him, and they put him on the train and brought him back to Keystone. George Dillon and I took charge of him. John wasn't able to stay up. We took charge of them and guarded them that night, and they come and threatened to lynch him, and we said they couldn't come up there, and Webb said if we would unhandcuff him and give him his gun nobody would come up there. We had him over Belcher's store.

"I believe I come down the next morning and put them in jail. I never knew anything more about the case until the trial. I was down here during the trial. After he was found guilty he wanted to be baptized. We took him down there to the river, and I was along with him when they baptized him. I forget what preacher baptized him. He had on a new suit of clothes, hat and everything, but he didn't like the looks of his shoes at all. I took them back and swapped them; and when he put them on and viewed himself he had on the best suit he ever had, the way I looked at it. He was about six feet two, I think, or maybe he might have been six foot three."

JUDGE HERNDON. Give his color, before you start on Gudgin.

MR. JOHNSON. He was black.

JUDGE HERNDON. About what age?

MR. JOHNSON. Well, I couldn't hardly tell you. I would figure him about thirty.

JUDGE HERNDON. Now give a description of Gudgin.

MR. JOHNSON. Well, Gudgin, I believe, was a little taller than I am, I believe about six feet, heavily built. He wasn't so fleshy, but he was heavy built, yellow.

JUDGE HERNDON. Were you deputy sheriff at the time?

MR. JOHNSON. I was constable.

JUDGE HERNDON. Campbell was deputy sheriff?

MR. JOHNSON. Yes.

JUDGE HERNDON.

Effler was the sheriff of McDowell County at that time?

MR. JOHNSON. Yes, sir.

JUDGE HERNDON. In the town of Welch now do you know about the spot where the scaffold was built?

MR. JOHNSON. Why, I could get out here and look it up, but it was right out here somewhere.

MR. DAVID COLLINS. It was right back of the old temporary jail.

JUDGE HERNDON. You say you don't remember the name of the man John Hardy killed?

MR. JOHNSON. No, I don't remember him.

JUDGE HERNDON. But do you remember what they killed him for?

MR. JOHNSON. They were shooting craps. It is my understanding they had had the crap game before, and this fellow had skinned Hardy, and he went back started the crap game to get to kill him. That was the statement at the time.

JUDGE HERNDON. In other words, this colored man that Hardy killed had skinned Hardy in the game before that game?

MR. JOHNSON. Yes, sir, and Hardy goes down and starts a crap game, and Webb was behind this rock with his Winchester so if Hardy failed he would get him. That was the statement, what they claimed when they came after us, when we went down there.

JUDGE HERNDON. Where was he from?

MR. JOHNSON. I don't know. I might have heard, but I never paid any attention. We were out nearly all night that night. I recollect it well. I think it was about the first year John Effler was elected sheriff. My recollection is that the time Hardy killed the other colored man was along some time during the first of the year, in 1893, and that he was tried along about April or May, 1893, and hanged soon after his conviction, about sixty days.

Mr. A. C. Payne, English, W. Va., in a letter dated Oct. 16, 1917, writes me as follows: —

"Just received your letter requesting information of a Negro named John Hardy. I was one of the

miner about 6 feet high and about 25 years old, as well as I could guess at him. He killed a Negro boy about 19 years old. And he was a very black Negro. That is about all I know about him."

The above-quoted statements seem to establish two groups of facts: —

1. (a) That about the year 1872 there was a certain John Hardy employed as a steel-driller in railroad-construction in the southern part of West Virginia. This man was a very black Negro, six feet tall, or more, of splendid physique, a drinker, a gambler, a roue, and a fierce fighter.

(b) That later this Negro killed a man in an altercation of some sort in which gambling played a part.

(c) That the murder and execution took place in the southern part of the State, near the Virginia line.

2. (a) That in the year 1893 a certain John Hardy was employed as a coal-miner in the extreme southern part of West Virginia. This man was a very black Negro, six feet two or three inches tall, and a gambler.

(b) That this John Hardy killed a man over a crap game for the sum of seventy-five cents.

(c) That the murder and execution took place in the southern part of the State, near the Virginia line.

The identity of these two men is not established, but the inference that they are the same is extremely probable. That two men of the same name and race, so nearly alike in physique, habits, and characteristics, should meet the same fate, for the same crime, in the same locality, is hardly believable.

The consideration of the age of the Hardy of 1893 is important in determining whether he and the Hardy of 1872 are identical. The

prowess of the steel-driller of 1872 indicates a man of mature age, let us say twenty-four or twenty-five. In 1893 he would then have been forty-five or forty-six. Three of the men connected with the trial of Hardy have given estimates of his age as follows: Tabor, assistant clerk of the Criminal Court, forty; Johnson, constable, thirty; Payne, jurymen, twenty-five. The value of these estimates depends upon two things, — first, accuracy of memory in recalling, after a lapse of twenty-four years, such details of feature as would enable one to judge of age; and, second, the ability of the witness to make such a judgment. Mr. Johnson says, "I couldn't hardly tell you about what age. I would figure him about thirty." The statement itself indicates much uncertainty about the matter. Mr. Payne says, "About twenty-five years old, as well as I could guess at him." Evidently at the trial Hardy's age was not brought out, or at least not emphasized enough to be remembered, and a guess by memory after twenty-four years may not be worth much. Mr. Tabor says, "About forty years of age." Mr. Tabor was deputy clerk of the court that tried Hardy, and is now engaged in civil engineering. His statements indicate a better-trained and more accurate type of mind than the others, and have a directness that is assuring. In any case, the judgment of the age of a Negro of the splendid physical type of Hardy is a difficult matter, hard to come at within ten years, and more likely to be underestimated than overestimated. In my judgment, the testimony may well point to an age considerable in excess of forty.

Mr. H. S. Walker, a man of mature years, a student in West Virginia University from Fayette

County, through which the C. & O. runs, reports the following as a current belief where he lives: —

John Hardy, a Negro, worked for Langhorn, a railroad-contractor from Richmond, Va., at the time of the building of the C. & O. Road. Langhorn had a contract for work on the east side of the Big Bend Tunnel, which is in the adjoining county of Summers, to the east of Fayette County; and some other contractor had the work on the west side of the tunnel. This was the time when the steam-driller was first used. Langhorn did not have one, but the contractor on the other side of the tunnel did; and Langhorn made a wager with him that Hardy could, by hand, drill a hole in less time than the steam-drill could. In the contest that followed, Hardy won, but dropped dead on the spot. He tells me, also, that there is a current report in this part of the State concerning a John Hardy who was a tough, a saloon frequenter, an outlaw, and a sort of a thug. He thinks this John Hardy was a white man, and he is sure that he was hanged later on for killing a man in McDowell County or across the line in Virginia.

Probability indicates that these two stories are about the same man. For a white man contemporary with the steel-driller to possess the same name and attributes as he, to operate in the early part of his career in the same region, to drift later to the same locality, to commit the same crime, and to pay the same penalty, is not believable.

There remains the belief that John Hardy died from the effects of the drilling-contest. In answer to inquiries concerning this, Ex-Gov. McCorkle writes, "You are mistaken when you say John Hardy died from the

drilling-contest." In support of the belief, however, there is a ballad called "The Steel Driver," not as yet found in West Virginia, but reported by Shearin in his *Syllabus of Kentucky Folk-Songs*, p. 19, as follows: —

"THE STEEL DRIVER, ii, 1a3b4c3b, II: John Henry, proud of his skill with sledge and hand-drill, competes with a modern steam-drill in Tunnel No. Nine, on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. Defeated, he dies, asking to be buried with his tools at his breast."

The change of name to John Henry, and the victory into a defeat, is not significant, and is easily accounted for by oral transmission. The same process of reasoning as applied heretofore identifies John Henry with John Hardy, who could not have died at the end of a drilling-contest. Most likely the ballad celebrating the prowess of John Hardy gradually, in its earlier making, enhanced that prowess, and, by the natural tendency to a tragic ending, finally sang of his defeat and death.

Whether the drilling-contest be fact or fiction, is not important. However, it could hardly have happened. A note addressed to the Ingersoll-Rand Company, to whom I was referred as authority on drills, brings the following statement in a letter dated New York City, Dec. 19, 1917: —

"Your letter of Dec. 4, addressed to the Company at Easton, Pa., has been referred to us, and in reply we would advise you that, although we have no definite records, it is rather improbable that steam rock-drills were used in the building of the C. & O. Railroad. As you will see from the text of the attached advertisement, machine-drills were first used about 1866; but their use was very limited, and not at all general."

The portion of the advertisement above referred to,



that is significant for this discussion, is as follows: —

"The first time rock-drills were used in big work was at the Hoosac Tunnel, year 1866. Here the Burleigh drill failed because of great repair costs. Next came the Musconetong Tunnel, Lehigh Valley R. R., driven from end to end with the Ingersoll drill, which had been brought to a practical stage in rock-work on Fourth Avenue, New York, for the horse-car tunnel. This covers the period up to 1875, when the Rand Little Giant made a step in advance."

The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad was completed westward from Sulphur Springs to Huntington — that is, entirely across the State of West Virginia — in 1873.

Two versions of the ballad, with a total of five variants, have come to hand. Version *a* gives us something with the very atmosphere of the construction-camp, its rough gang of illiterate Negroes, its profanity, and its glorification of a gambler, a drunkard, and a murderer. With the exception of stanzas 2 and 3, the ballad deals with the episode of the hanging, in some way not clearly stated, and connected with gambling. The name of the place, Shawnee Camp, is exactly correct; but the number of men killed is increased to two, and the murderer is caught because he refused to run. Not only does the bulk of the ballad deal with this incident in the career of John Hardy, but the prominent places, the beginning and the end, are given to it. The older incident of the steel-drilling contest is, however, clearly remembered and vigorously expressed, though evidently on the way to forgetfulness. This version stands half way, as it were, between the "Steel Driller" listed by Shearin and version *b*.

In version *b* the steel-driller has dropped out of memory

entirely. Shawnee Camp has become a Chinese camp, — an easy change, — and consequently the man killed is a Chinaman. The yellow girl with her money is still in the game, and a man is killed in a gambling-brawl. The reference to the Big Bend Tunnel is probably a cross-reference from another West Virginia ballad (namely, "The Wreck on the C. & O. Road") very popular in the southern part of the State, and contemporary in growth with that part of "John Hardy" since 1894. The last two stanzas, given to John Hardy himself, furnish an interesting reference to a fact in his history (namely, his baptism before hanging), and may be a remnant of the song he composed and sang just before his death. The introduction of the conventional ballad element of having the hero's mother and sweetheart come to see him is to be noted in stanzas 6 and 7.

Versions *c*, *d*, and *e* are variants of version *b*. In *c* the Negro gambling-dive is exalted to a "Wild West show" (stanza 2), and the conventionalizing process is carried further in stanza 6 by giving him a "pretty little wife," whom he kept "dressed in blue," and who had always been true to him. In *d* the yellow girl becomes a less shadowy personage, upon whom is bestowed the high-sounding, romantic name, Rozella (stanza 2). The refusal of the Court to grant bond to a "murderer" man in stanza 6 is a good bit of realism, with which, no doubt, the Negro singers of this ballad were fairly familiar. The reference to his baptism fails to appear. In *e* the conventionalizing process goes on apace: the father is introduced, the hero is blessed with three children, and two stanzas (7 and 8) from *The Lass of Roch Royal* (Child, No. 76) are inserted.

As a result of this study, the following things appeal to me as significant: —

1. The origin in our day of such a ballad among an illiterate and comparatively primitive people.

2. The testimony of spontaneous composition of stanzas by men engaged in the hard work of steel-drilling.

3. The two groups of facts in Hardy's life centring respectively about the dates 1872 and 1894, which furnish the nuclei for three types of ballad as to content: (a) John Hardy, the steel-driver; (b) John Hardy, the steel-driver and the murdered; (c) John Hardy, the murderer.

4. The unreliability of statements in the ballad; and the difficulty, even at this early date, of determining the facts on which the song is based.

5. The passing of the song into the possession of white folk, and the rapid introduction on conventional elements of balladry. All the copies of the ballad in my possession were communicated by white people.

"John Hardy" is recorded elsewhere as follows: —

SHEARIN AND COMBS, A Syllabus of Kentucky Folk-Song, p. 19. "John Hardy," iii, 4a3b4c3b, 6. — An account of Hardy's shooting a man in a poker-game; of his arrest, trial, conviction, conversion, and baptism; and of his execution and burial on the Tug River.

— *Ibid.*, "The Steel Driver," ii, 4a3b4c3b, II. — John Henry, proud of his skill with sledge and hand-drill, competes with a modern steam-drill in Tunnel No. Nine, on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Defeated, he dies, asking to be buried with his tools at his breast.

JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE, 22:247. — A North Carolina version of four stanzas contributed by Miss Louise Rand Bascom, in which John Hardy shot a man in New Orleans Town, as he is

made to say, "for the sake of her love." The fact of his baptism is mentioned.

*Ibid.*, 22:249-250. — Louise Rand Bascom reports from North Carolina "Johnie Henry," which she says begins, —

"Johnie Henry was a hard workin' man, He died with his hammer in his hand."

*Ibid.*, 26:163-165. — Five variants of "John Henry" reported by E. C. Sparrow. The first four are brief, and the only significant lines are, —

"This ole hammer killed John Henry, Drivin' Steel, Baby, drivin' steel."

The fifth is a ballad of eight stanzas, obtained from Kentucky mountain whites. In it John Henry is a steel-driver, who competes with a steam-driller in a big tunnel, apparently on the C. & O. line. He leaves a faithful wife to mourn his death.

*Ibid.*, 26:180-182. — Variant *e* of this study, communicated by the present writer; also printed in West Virginia School Journal and Educator, 44:216-217 (September, 1915).

*Ibid.*, 27:249. — Reported by title, "That's the Hammer killed John Henry," from South Carolina, by Henry C. Davis.

*Ibid.*, 28:14. — Communicated by John A. Lomax as being sung along the Chesapeake and Ohio Road in Kentucky and West Virginia. John Henry, the best steel-driver on the C. & O. Road, competes with a steam-driller in Tunnel No. Nine, beats it by an inch and a half, and lays down his hammer and dies.

CAMPBELL AND SHARP, English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians, pp. 257-258: "John Hardy." — A ballad in nine stanzas. Nothing is said of steel-driving, and the hero kills his partner for fifty cents in the "Shunny Camps" (Shawnee Camp). Hardy is evidently thought of as a white man, for the murder is done "for the sake of my blue-eyed girl." The fact of his baptism is mentioned, and two stanzas from "The Lass of Roch Royal" are inserted, the same stanzas as in variant *e* of the present study.



THE BERE A QUARTERLY  
(Berea, Ky.), 14 (October, 1910): 26  
(N. 3). — Two stanzas only: —

"John Hardy had a wife, a child,  
A wife and child had he;  
But he cared no more for his wife and child  
Than he did for the fish in the sea.

He'd play cards with a white man,  
He'd play cards with him fair,  
He'd play the hat right off his head,  
He'd play him for his hair."

FRANK C. BROWN, Literary and Historical  
Ballad-Literature in North Association of North Carolina,  
Carolina (reprinted from Dec. 1-2, 1914), p. 12. Listed as  
Proceedings and Addresses of the found in North Carolina.  
Fifteenth Annual Session of the

#### JOHN HARDY.

(Version a.)

(Communicated by Dr. H. S. Green, Charleston, W. Va. He obtained it from  
Ex-Gov. W.A. McCorkle, who says he has known it about twenty years.)

1. John Hardy was a bad, bad man,  
He came from a bad, bad land;  
He killed two men in a Shawnee camp,  
Cause he's too damn nervy for to run, God damn!  
Too damn nervy for to run.
2. John Hardy went to the rock quarrie,  
He went there for to drive, Lord, Lord!  
The rock was so hard and the steel so soft,  
That he laid down his hammer and he cried, "O my God!"  
He laid down his hammer and he cried.
3. John Hardy was standing on my right-hand side,  
The steel hammers on my left, Lord, Lord!  
"Before I'd let the steamer beat me down,  
I'd die with my hammer in my hand, by God!  
I'd die with my hammer in my hand."
4. John Hardy was standing at the dice-room door,  
So drunk he could not see, Lordy, Lord!  
'Long come his woman, five dollars in her hand,  
Said "You count John Hardy in the game, God damn!  
You count John Hardy in the game."
5. John Hardy went to playing in the game of cards,  
The pot was broken, says, he stayed, Lordy, Lord!  
He drew the nine of diamonds to a diamond bob,  
And he says, "I'll let the whole damn bill play, by God!"  
He says, "I'll let the whole bill play."
6. John Hardy went staggering by the jail-house,  
As drunk as he could be, Lordy, Lord!

Up stepped a leaceman, caught him by the arm,  
Says, "John Hardy, come and go with me, poor boy!  
John Hardy, come and go with me."

7. Friends and relatives all standing round,  
Crying, "John Hardy, what have you done, poor boy?"  
"I've murdered two men in the Shawnee camp,  
Was too damn nervy for to run, God damn!  
Now I'm standing on my hanging-ground."

*(Version b.)*

(Communicated by Mr. E. C. Smith, Weston, Lewis County, who obtained it from Miss Maude Rucks, Heaters, Braxton County.)

1. John Hardy was but three days old,  
Sitting on his mamma's knee,  
When he looked straight up at her and said,  
"The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road  
Is bound to be the death of me,  
The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road  
Is bound to be the death of me."
2. John Hardy was standing in a dice-room door,  
Not taking any interest in the game,  
When a yellow girl threw ten dollars on the board,  
Saying, "Deal John Hardy in the game, poor boy!  
Deal John Hardy in the game."
3. John Hardy drew his pistol from his pocket,  
And threw it down on the tray,  
Saying, "The man that uses my yellow girl's money,  
I'm going to blow him away, away,  
I'm going to blow him away."
4. John Hardy drew to a four card straight,  
And the Chinaman drew to a pair;  
John failed to catch, and the Chinaman won,  
And he left him sitting back dead in his chair,  
And he left him lying dead in his chair.
5. John started to catch the east-bound train,  
So dark he could not see;  
A police walked up and took him by the arm,  
Saying, "John Hardy, come and go with me, poor boy!  
John Hardy, come and go with me."
6. John Hardy's mamma came to him,  
Saying, "John, what have you done?"  
"I've murdered a man in a Chinese camp,  
And now I'm sentenced to be hung, O Lord!  
And now I'm sentenced to be hung."
7. John Hardy's sweetheart came to him,  
She came to go his bail;  
They put her on a west-bound train,  
And shoved John Hardy back in jail, poor boy!  
And shoved John Hardy back in jail.

8. "I've been to the East and I've been to the West,  
I've travelled this wide world round;  
I've been to the river and I've been baptized,  
And now I'm on my hanging-ground, O Lord!  
And now I'm on my hanging-ground.
9. "I don't care a damn for the C. & O. Road,  
And I don't care a damn what I say;  
I don't care a snap for the police."  
But they let John Hardy get away, poor boy!  
They let John Hardy get away.

*(Version c.)*

(Communicated by Mr. Lee C. Wooddell, Durbin, Pocahontas County, who obtained it from Mr. Ernie Wright, Hosterman, Pocahontas County.)

1. John Hardy he was two years old,  
Sitting on his mother's knee:  
"The Big Ben Tunnel on the C. & O. Road  
Is going to be the death of me, poor boy,  
Is going to be the death of me, poor boy."
2. John Hardy went into a Wild West show,  
Playing at a fifty-cent game:  
"Whoever wins my fifty cents,  
I'm going to blow out his brains, poor boy!  
I'm going to blow out his brains, poor boy."
3. John Hardy laid down a twenty-dollar bill,  
And he didn't ask for change:  
"All I want is a forty-four gun  
To blow out another nigger's brains, poor boy!  
To blow out another nigger's brains, poor boy!"
4. John Hardy went to New Port,  
Expecting to be free.  
The detective patted him on the back:  
"John Hardy, go along with me, poor boy!  
John Hardy, go along with me, poor boy!"
5. "I've been to the East, I've been to the West,  
And I've been all over the world;  
I've been to the river to be baptized,  
But I'm on my hanging-ground, poor boy!  
But I'm on my hanging-ground, poor boy!"
6. John Hardy had a pretty little wife,  
He kept her dressed in blue.  
When she heard that John was dead,  
"John Hardy, I've been true to you, poor boy!  
John Hardy, I've been true to you, poor boy!"

*(Version d.)*

(Communicated by Mr. John B. Adkins, Branchland, Lincoln County, who obtained it from David Dick, an old banjo-player.)



1. John Hardy he was a desperate man,  
He roved from town to town,  
Saying, "The man that wins my money this time,  
I'm going to blow his life away,  
And lay him in his lonesome grave."
2. John Hardy was standing in the dice-room door,  
He was not concerned in the game;  
Rozella threw down one silver dollar,  
Saying, "Deal John Hardy in the game, poor boy!"  
Saying, "Deal John Hardy in the game."
3. John Hardy threw down one half-dollar,  
Saying, "One half of this I'll play,  
And the man that wins my money this time,  
I'm going to blow his life away,  
And lay him in his lonesome grave."
4. John Hardy was making for the station that night,  
It was so dark he could hardly see;  
A policeman took him by the arm,  
Saying, "John, won't you come and go with me, poor boy?  
John, won't you come and go with me?"
5. Every station they passed through,  
They heard the people say,  
"Yonder goes John Hardy making his escape,  
John Hardy is getting away, poor boy!  
John Hardy is getting away."
6. They brought John Hardy out before the judge,  
And bond they offered him:  
No bond was allowed a murderin man,  
So they put John Hardy back in jail, poor boy!  
They put John Hardy back in jail.
7. John Hardy's wife went mourning along,  
Went mourning along in blue,  
Saying, "O John, what have you done!  
I've always been true to you, poor boy!  
I've always been true to you."

*(Version e.)*

(Communicated by Mr. E. C. Smith, Weston, Lewis County. It was written out from memory by Walter Mick, Ireland, W. Va., who learned it from hearing it sung by people of his community.)

1. John Hardy was a little farmer boy,  
Sitting on his father's knee;  
Says he, "I fear the C. & O. Road  
Will be the ruination of me, poor boy!  
Will be the ruination of me."
2. John Hardy got to be a desperate man,  
Carried a pistol and a razor every day;  
Shot a nigger through the heel in a Chinese camp,  
And you ought of seen that nigger get away, poor boy!  
And you ought of seen that nigger get away.

3. John Hardy's mother ran up to him,  
Saying, "Son, what have you done?"  
"I murdered a man in a Chinese camp,  
And now I'm sentenced to be hung, poor boy!  
And now I'm sentenced to be hung."
4. John Hardy's father went to the judge,  
Saying, "What do you think will be done?"  
The judge he answer with a quick reply,  
"I'm afraid John Hardy will be hung, poor boy!  
I'm afraid John Hardy will be hung."
5. John Hardy was standing in a dice-room door,  
He didn't have a nickel to his name;  
Along came a yaller gal, threw a dollar on the board,  
Saying, "Deal John Hardy in the game, poor boy!"  
Saying, "Deal John Hardy in the game."
6. John Hardy was standing in a railroad-station,  
As drunk as he could be:  
A policeman came up and took him by the arm,  
"John Hardy, come along with me, poor boy!  
John Hardy, come along with me."
7. "Oh, who will shoe your pretty little feet,  
And who will glove your hands,  
And who will kiss your sweet rosy lips,  
When I'm in a foreign land, poor boy!  
When I'm in a foreign land?"
8. "My father will shoe my pretty little feet,  
My mother will glove my hands;  
John Hardy will kiss my sweet rosy lips,  
When he comes from a foreign land, poor boy!  
When he comes from a foreign land."
9. John Hardy married a loving wife,  
And children he had three:  
He called to him his oldest son,  
Saying, "Son, make a man like me, poor boy!"  
Saying, "Son, make a man like me."
10. John Hardy married a loving wife,  
And children he had three:  
He cared no more for his wife and child  
Than the rocks in the bottom of the sea, poor boy!  
Than the rocks in the bottom of the sea."

NOTE. — The following statement was made to me in person in the summer of 1918 by Mr. James Knox Smith, a Negro lawyer of Keystone, McDowell County, who was present at the trial and also at the execution of John Hardy: —

"Hardy worked for the Shawnee Coal Company, and one pay-day night he killed a man in a crap game over a dispute of twenty-five cents. Before the game began, he laid his pistol on the table, saying to it, 'Now I want you to lay here; and the first

nigger that steals money from me, I mean to kill him.' About midnight he began to lose, and claimed that one of the Negroes had taken twenty-five cents of his money. The man denied the charge, but gave him the amount; whereupon he said, 'Don't you know that I won't lie to my gun?' Thereupon he seized his pistol and shot the man dead.

"After the crime he hid around the Negro shanties and in the mountains a few days, until John Effler (the sheriff) and John Campbell (a deputy) caught him. Some of the Negroes told them where Hardy was, and, slipping into the shanty where he was asleep, they first took his shotgun and pistol, then they waked him up and put the cuffs on him. Effler handcuffed Hardy to himself, and took the train at Eckman for Welch. Just as the train was passing through a tunnel, and Effler was taking his prisoner from one car to another, Hardy jumped, and took Effler with him. He tried to get hold of Effler's pistol; and the sheriff struck him over the head with it, and almost killed him. Then he unhandcuffed himself from Hardy, tied him securely with ropes, took him to Welch, and put him in jail.

"While in jail after his conviction, he could look out and see the men building his scaffold; and he walked up and down his cell, telling the rest of the prisoners that he would never be hung on that scaffold. Judge H. H. Christian, who had defended Hardy, heard of this, visited him in jail, advised him not to kill himself or compel the officers to kill him, but to prepare to die. Hardy began to sing and pray, and finally sent for the Reverend Lex Evans, a white Baptist preacher, told him he had made his peace with God, and asked to be



It's a dobro.

baptized. Evans said he would as soon baptize him as he would a white man. Then they let him put on a new suit of clothes, the guards led him down to the Tug River, and Evans baptized him. On the scaffold he begged the sheriff's pardon for the way he had treated him, said that he intended to fight to the death and not be hung, but that after he got religion he did not feel like fighting. He confessed that he had done wrong, killed a man under the influence of whiskey, and advised all young men to avoid gambling and drink. A great throng witnessed the hanging.

"Hardy was black as a crow, over six feet tall, weighed about two hundred pounds, raw-boned, and had unusually long arms. He came originally from down eastern Virginia, and had no family. He had formerly been a steel-driver, and was about forty years old, or more." — John Harrington Cox

END.



sentenced to hang. It is said that Hardy from his cell could see men building the scaffold on which he would be hanged and that the condemned man swore he would never suffer that kind of death. Judge H. H. Christian, who had defended Hardy, visited him in jail, and advised him not to kill himself or compel the officers to kill him, but to prepare for his

Vol. XXXII, p. 505, and in a doctoral dissertation by John Harrington Cox in the Harvard University Library.

The following order for the execution of John Hardy is on file at the court house in Welch:

"This day came again the State by her attorney and the Prisoner who stands convicted of murder in the first degree was again

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### JOHN HENRY: A FOLK-LORE STUDY

The Entire Study by Louis W. Chappell

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death. Hardy thereafter became a Christian and was baptized in Tug River by Reverend Lex Evans, a white Baptist preacher. On the scaffold Hardy begged the Sheriff's pardon for the attempt to escape and confessed that he had done wrong, advising young men to avoid gambling and drinking. He was hanged on January 19, 1893, before a large crowd.

The ballad of John Hardy has several variants, and sometimes there is confusion between it and the ballad of John Henry (see). The tunes are somewhat similar and since both Hardy and Henry were steel drivers who had worked on the Big Bend Tunnel, it is easy to see how this confusion developed. Most versions give the name of the coal camp in which the murder took place as "Shawnee," which corresponds with what is known about the historical John Hardy. However, sometimes the murdered man is said to have been a Chinese and often there is reference to a dispute over a woman, which, if part of the actual story, cannot be proved or denied.

Further information about John Hardy is carried in the *Journal of American Folklore*,

brought to the bar of the Court in custody of the Sheriff of this County; and thereupon the Prisoner being asked by the Court if anything he had or could say why the Court should not proceed to pass sentence of the law upon him in accordance with the verdict of the jury impanelled in this cause, and the Prisoner saying nothing why such sentence should not be passed upon him by the Court; It is therefore considered by the Court that the Prisoner John Hardy, is guilty as found by the verdict of the jury herein and that the said John Hardy be hanged by the neck until he is dead, and that the Sheriff of the County, on Friday the 19th day of January 1894, take the said John Hardy from the jail of the County to some suitable place to be selected by him in this County and there hang the said John Hardy by the neck until he is dead, and the prisoner is remanded to jail."

JOHN HARDY. Sheet music, arranged by Elie Siegmeister.


JOHNNY, BRING THE JUG 'ROUND THE HILL. Single record, Kessinger Brothers.

JOHNSON, Jeraldine, known as "Jerry" was born in Valley

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# JOHN HENRY

## A FOLK-LORE STUDY



BY  
LOUIS W. CHAPPELL

KENNIKAT PRESS, INC./PORT WASHINGTON, N. Y.

## PREFACE

As a folk-lore figure, especially in the American black belt and border regions, John Henry is having a somewhat varied development, but rightfully belongs to the rock-tunnel gangs, the hand-drillers of the frontier. He is the great steel-driver, and as natural man flings himself, in a moment of triumph, against the machine of the industrial period after the Civil War. Like Paul Bunyan, he does impossible feats, but, unlike him, he often does them unassumingly. Thus he exists in oral tradition, and has not run, like Robin Hood, the full gamut of popular evolution, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of satiric parody, but with a greater metamorphosis has achieved diverse personalities and occupations, some of them superhuman, perhaps, but hardly as yet divine.

The amount and nature of the factual material that lies behind this widespread tradition has engaged the attention of several scholars, with a somewhat unconvincing variety of results. For the most part, they have added to its confusion in one way or another. John Henry was at first confused with John Hardy, another popular character in the folk-lore of the South; later he was set apart as purely mythical. These positions were taken without due regard for the tradition itself, and both have been revised or abandoned altogether. Presumably as a real man of flesh and blood, he has had some attention; but, more often than not, under the disguise of an objective treatment, a cloud of romantic idealism has obscured his more human qualities. Whether as man or myth, scholars, strangely enough, have treated him the same; and a new consideration of the whole matter, on the basis of a larger collection of data, seems necessary.

Although some ten years ago when this study began John Henry had been investigated at various points in the South, I was the first to discover the immediate region of his activity, as indicated by the tradition; and since then, with more than intermittent attention, I have followed his trail from the Great Lakes to the West Indies, and have repeatedly visited what seemed to be the most significant localities. Although some of the minor results of these investigations have appeared in the learned periodicals, the larger aspects of the subject seem to require the space of a monograph.

The contributors to this study are many, scattered far and wide. It is a pleasure to remember them, but they are too numerous to mention here. Thanks for helpful suggestions are also due to Dr. John W. Draper and Dr. Walter Wadepuhl, my colleagues in West Virginia University.

Morgantown,  
July, 1932.

L. W. C.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Chappell's *John Henry* is reproduced here photographically from the original. In order to facilitate use of footnotes and index, the original pagination has been retained.



# INTRODUCTION

Interest in the John Henry tradition dates back to 1909, the year Louise Rand Bascom published, from western North Carolina, two lines of "John Henry":<sup>1)</sup>

Johnie Henry was a hard workin' man,  
He died with his hammer in his hand<sup>2)</sup>.

Along with this fragment, Miss Bascom contributed a version of "John Hardy",<sup>3)</sup> the ballad of a Negro murderer and outlaw hanged in southern West Virginia near the turn of the century. In October, 1910, two stanzas of "John Hardy" from Kentucky appeared in *Berea Quarterly*, and the following year Shearin and Combs mentioned as current in that state both "John Henry" and "John Hardy".<sup>4)</sup> In 1913, Perrow published versions of the John Henry song from Indiana, Tennessee, and Mississippi, and a version of "John Henry" from Kentucky.<sup>5)</sup> The same year Professor Kittredge added a text of "John Hardy",<sup>6)</sup> communicated by Dr. John H. Cox, who obtained it in West Virginia. The following year "John Hardy" was again reported from North Carolina,<sup>7)</sup> and the John Henry song from South Carolina.<sup>8)</sup> In 1915, "John Henry, or The Steam Drill" was reported from Kentucky,<sup>9)</sup> and another version published as "sung along the Chesapeake and Ohio Road in Kentucky and West Virginia".<sup>10)</sup> From 1909 to 1915, then, the John Henry tradition had ten reports and the John Hardy tradition but five, with John Henry far more widely celebrated than his popular rival.

In 1916, W. A. McCorkle, ex-Governor of West Virginia, contributed a seven-stanza version of "John Hardy", with stanzas 2 and 3 belonging to "John Henry", and gave out a popular report of John Hardy, the "steel-driver ... famous in the beginning of the building of the C. & O. Railroad" across West Virginia about 1872, who subsequently made his final exit in a killing down in the southwest

<sup>1)</sup> Used in this study for the John Henry ballad as separate from the John Henry song. For examples of both types, see Appendix.

<sup>2)</sup> *Journal*, XXII, 249.

<sup>3)</sup> *Ibid.*, XXII, 247. For examples, see Appendix.

<sup>4)</sup> H. G. Shearin and Josiah H. Combs. *A Syllabus of Kentucky Folk-Songs*, p. 19.

<sup>5)</sup> E. C. Perrow. *Journal*, XXVI, 163 ff.

<sup>6)</sup> G. L. Kittredge. *Journal*, XXVI, 180—182.

<sup>7)</sup> F. C. Brown. *Proceedings and Addresses of the 15th Annual Session of the Literary and Historical Association of North Carolina*, p. 12.

<sup>8)</sup> H. C. Davis. *Journal*, XXVII, 249.

<sup>9)</sup> *Berea Quarterly*, Oct., 1915, p. 20.

<sup>10)</sup> John A. Lomax. *Journal*, XXVIII, 14.

part of the state. McCorkle characterized John Hardy as a "man of kind heart, very strong, pleasant in his address, yet a gambler, a roué, a drunkard, and a fierce fighter", a sort of composite character.<sup>11)</sup> This account combines the tradition of the steel-driver John Henry and that of the outlaw and murderer John Hardy.

Following the lead of McCorkle's ballad text and hearsay report, Dr. Cox, in 1919, accepted John Henry as John Hardy, whom he identified as the Negro murderer hanged at Welch, West Virginia, in 1894, and treated the Henry ballad and song as belonging to Hardy. Among the things that appealed to Dr. Cox as significant in this body of material were "the two groups of facts in Hardy's life centring respectively about the dates 1872 and 1894, which furnish the nuclei for three types of ballad as to content: (a) John Hardy, the steel-driver; (b) John Hardy, the steel-driver and the murdered; (c) John Hardy, the murderer".<sup>12)</sup> By 1925 he had succeeded in bringing together nine versions of his "John Hardy", and in that year repeated his treatment of John Henry and John Hardy as the same man.<sup>13)</sup> In 1927 he answered objections to his thesis with a call for further investigation of the subject,<sup>14)</sup> and the following year renewed his request.<sup>15)</sup>

I have already considered that request in part by an examination of the Henry-Hardy problem from the Hardy angle, the approach Dr. Cox himself made.<sup>16)</sup> I found that Dr. Cox had not taken fully into account the documentary records of John Hardy, that in his testimonial data he had given preference to hearsay reports, and that he had not shown proper regard for the wide diffusion of the John Henry tradition. My investigations, resulting in a fuller presentation of background material largely corrective of Dr. Cox's publications on the subject, led to the conclusion that John Hardy is properly connected with the group of facts associated with the Negro murderer around 1894, the basis for "John Hardy", but brought to light nothing to justify treating him as the heroic steel-driver connected with the group of facts around 1872, the basis for "John Henry". With these limitations to the "composite" John Hardy, this study need consider the work of Dr. Cox, his methods as well as his conclusions, only in so far as it concerns the treatment of "John Henry" as a version of "John Hardy".

Among the nine versions of Dr. Cox's "John Hardy",<sup>17)</sup> stanzas 2 and 3 of A, 1 of B, 1 of C, 1 of E, and all of H belong to "John Henry". The name John Hardy, however, appears in stanzas 4 and 10 of H and raises all sorts of questions; but, since the two ballads are mixed in four of the other texts, and since the names Henry

<sup>11)</sup> Journal, XXXII, 505 ff.

<sup>12)</sup> John H. Cox, Journal, XXXII, 505-520.

<sup>13)</sup> Folk-Songs of the South, p. 175 ff.

<sup>14)</sup> American Speech, II, 227.

<sup>15)</sup> American Literature, I, 107.

<sup>16)</sup> Philological Quarterly, IX, 260 ff.

<sup>17)</sup> Folk-Songs of the South, pp. 178-188.

and Hardy appear together in A, one is disposed to accept them together in H. This text, though, comes from Knott County, Kentucky, and the two ballads seem not to be greatly confused in that state. It appears, moreover, that Dr. Combs contributed the ballad to *Folk-Songs of the South*, and then published it himself the same year as "John Henry, The Steel-Driving Man", without the name John Hardy occurring in it.<sup>18)</sup> Such a significant difference on the part of two noted ballad scholars in handling common material would seem to call for an examination of the texts they published relative to this study.

Their two printings of H have additional values in that direction. Dr. Cox uses the name "John Henry" for Dr. Combs' "Johnny" in line 1 of stanza 2, "&" for Dr. Combs' "and" in line 3 of stanza 2, and omits Dr. Combs' "that" in line 4 of stanza 9. Furthermore, the failure of Dr. Cox to continue his use of "etc." beyond stanza 6 resulted in the loss of "my babe" in line 4 and the necessary repetition for line 5 of each of the stanzas from 7 to 12 as given by Dr. Combs, whose mark for line 5 in stanza 2, and apparently for line 5 in all subsequent stanzas of the text, leads to a variation from his own pattern of stanza 1. Differences of punctuation and arrangement need not be taken into account.

This version, it seems, passed through the hands only of these two editors, beginning with Dr. Combs as collector. An examination of "The Yew Pine Mountains", a version of the John Henry song, contributed by Mr. Woofter<sup>19)</sup> and published separately by these two editors,<sup>20)</sup> has point in this connection.

Dr. Combs does not state when he obtained his copy of this song from Mr. Woofter, but he published it in 1925. Two years later Dr. Cox published it, without reference to its earlier appearance, and stated in a footnote that it was "communicated by Mr. Carey Woofter ... October 17, 1924". Their printings show notable differences:

Refrain, line 4:

Combs: For that's my home, babe, for that's my home.

Cox: For that's my home, babe, that's my home.

Stanza 2, line 4:

Combs: But it'll not kill me, babe, it'll not kill me.

Cox: But it won't kill me, babe, it won't kill me.

Stanza 3, line 4:

Combs: But it'll not kill me, babe, but it'll not kill me.

Cox: But it won't kill me, babe, it won't kill me.

Stanza 5, line 1:

Combs: Forty-four days makes forty-four dollars.

Cox: Forty-four days make forty-four dollars.

<sup>18)</sup> Josiah H. Combs. *Folk-Songs du Midi des États-Unis*, p. 191 ff.

<sup>19)</sup> Carey Woofter. Glenville State Normal, Glenville, W. Va.

<sup>20)</sup> *Folk-Songs du Midi des États-Unis*, p. 193 ff. *American Speech*, II, 226-7.



Stanza 6, line 4:

Combs: O come back home, babe, O come back home.

Cox: Oh, come back home, babe, come back home.

These differences are significant, and seem to belong to different versions of "The Yew Pine Mountains", but Mr. Woofter seems to be an individual source.

What is the explanation of these discrepancies in common material in the hands of these two editors? Are those in the "John Henry" text to be accounted for on the ground that Dr. Combs furnished Dr. Cox a copy different from that he used in his own work? Are those in "The Yew Pine Mountains" text to be accounted for on the ground that Mr. Woofter varied his copies of the same version of the song? Possibly the editors were using different versions of the ballad and song and their variations can be explained in that way. Their editorial notes throw no light on the matter, and the answer must come from Dr. Combs and Mr. Woofter.

The fact that the former has not published his texts the second time and that the latter's ballad collection is still in manuscript form does not permit an examination of their practices in handling such material, but fortunately Dr. Cox can be tested on that score. His bibliography of 1925<sup>21)</sup> shows that of his nine "John Hardy" texts he published five, A to E inclusive, in 1919, and that before this date one of them, version E, had had two printings, one by Dr. Cox himself in 1915 and the other by Professor Kittredge in 1913. Four of these texts show important variations in their several printings, and E develops a new stanza.<sup>22)</sup>

<sup>21)</sup> Folk-Songs of the South, p. 177.

<sup>22)</sup> Version A contains seven stanzas, and shows seven differences in its two published forms. The word "quarry" in line 1 of stanza 2 in the printing of 1925 is "quarrie" in that of 1919, "stays" in line 2 of stanza 5 of 1925 is "stayed" in that of 1919, "an" in line 4 of stanza 6 of 1925 is "and" in that of 1919, and "a" in line 3 of stanza 7 of 1925 is "the" in that of 1919. Line 1 of stanza 7 of the printing of 1925 is "Friends and relatives standing around" and that of 1919 is "Friends and relatives all standing round". The second "was" in line 3 of stanza 2 and "damn" of line 5 of stanza 5 of 1925 are not in the text as printed in 1919.

Versions B, C, and D show fewer variations in their two printings. In B the word "mama" in the printing of 1925 is "mamma" in that of 1919. In the two printings of C no important differences appear. In D the pronoun "he" in line 1 of stanza 1 in the printing of 1919 is not in that of 1925, and "that" in line 1 of stanza 5 of 1925 is not in that of 1919.

Version E was contributed by Walter Mick, Ireland, W. Va. Dr. E. C. Smith, Department of Government, New York University, collected the text several years ago and while he was a student in West Virginia University communicated it to Dr. Cox, who passed it on to Professor Kittredge for publication in the *Journal*. Its two earlier printings, that of Professor Kittredge in 1913 and that of Dr. Cox in 1915, are much alike, and the two later, that of 1919 and that of 1925, both by Dr. Cox, are much alike, differing materially in only two words. The word "answer" in line 3 of stanza 4 in the printing of 1919 is "answered" in that of 1925, and "Oh" in line 1 of stanza 7 of 1919 is "O" in that of 1925, with "answer" and "O" found in the two earlier printings. "I am" in lines 4 and 5 of stanza 3 in the two earlier printings is contracted into "I'm" in those of the later

What is the explanation of these discrepancies in the work of a single editor? Does their character indicate a return to the practices of 18th century ballad scholars, a modified form of development by accretion? Or can they be explained on other ground? I am not disposed to find that Dr. Cox has had his hand in matters beyond his province. Very probably some of them are typographical errors, and others may have resulted from confusions in handling a large number of manuscripts, possibly during years when he was overtaxed with other work. His confusion, in this connection, of "C. E. Smith"<sup>23)</sup> for E. C. Smith, "E. C. Sparrow"<sup>24)</sup> for E. C. Perrow, and "Negro Work-A-Day Songs"<sup>25)</sup> for Negro Workaday Songs possibly shows too great reliance on memory. Such variations, however, in his two or more printings of these texts seem to render unnecessary the inquiry Dr. Guy B. Johnson states that he made of Dr. Cox concerning the appearance of the name John Henry in stanza 3 of version A.<sup>26)</sup>

It follows, then, that the appearance of the name John Hardy in stanzas 4 and 10 of H may evidence an extension of these methods in editing the text; but one will be inclined, although reluctantly, to depart from mere "happenstance" as an explanation in this case because his variation from Dr. Combs' "John Henry, The Steel-Driving Man" provides a basis for classifying the version as belonging to "John Hardy", a turn in line with his treatment of the two ballads as one, and the two men as John Hardy. Whether Dr. Cox, however, is actually responsible for the name John Hardy in the text must be determined finally by the copy Dr. Combs, the collector, furnished him. John Hardy has a way of getting mixed up with John Henry,<sup>27)</sup> and possibly the methods of Dr. Cox as shown in his texts from A to E did not affect his H. Nevertheless, this version, with or without the name of the outlaw, belongs to "John Henry".<sup>28)</sup>

two, "did not" in line 2 of stanza 5 of the earlier two is contracted into "didn't" in the later two, and "yaller girl" in line 3 of stanza 5 in the earlier two is "yaller gal" in the later two. The most significant difference, however, between the two earlier and the two later printings is the addition of a 5-line stanza, stanza 6 of the printing of 1925 and 1919, but not found in those of 1915 and 1913.

<sup>23)</sup> West Virginia School Journal and Educator XLIV (1915), 216. Cf. Journal, XXVI, 180. XXXII, 518; Folk-Songs of the South, p. 182.

<sup>24)</sup> Journal, XXXII, 513. Cf. Journal, XXVI, 163; Folk-Songs of the South, p. 177.

<sup>25)</sup> American Speech, II, 227.

<sup>26)</sup> John Henry, p. 66 (n).

<sup>27)</sup> Newman I. White. American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 189. Dr. White says: "Miss Scarborough (1926, p. 218) accepts Cox's opinion without discussion, but the songs she quotes mention John Hardy only." They mention John Henry only, and his bibliography gives the date of her book as 1925.

<sup>28)</sup> Fortunately no general destruction of "John Henry" texts has resulted from these discrepancies. The most notable case that has come to my attention appeared in Fayette Tribune, Fayetteville, W. Va., April 22, 1925.

In 1925, the year Dorothy Scarborough accepted without discussion Dr. Cox's treatment of the Henry and Hardy traditions as one, Dr. Combs objected, and explained for "John Henry" and "John Hardy": "Elles ne sont pas davantage deux variantes de la même chanson ... Le récit dans John Henry est entièrement différent."<sup>29</sup>) Two years later Dr. Gordon called attention to the distinction between the two ballad heroes, and added that their songs are often "somewhat confused by the singer". He characterized Hardy as a "desperado, Henry a good-natured, almost lovable steel-drivin' man".<sup>30</sup>) The following year Dr. White agreed to the separation of the Henry and Hardy traditions.<sup>31</sup>) These investigators of popular balladry in the South added little or nothing to what was already known about "John Henry", and made no great effort to. They did little more than object to such use of Henry material as that Dr. Cox had made in taking it over for his composite John Hardy.

Dr. Odum and his colleague, Dr. Johnson, published in 1926 eleven texts of "John Henry" and four of the Henry song, and were "inclined to believe that John Henry was of separate origin and has become mixed with the John Hardy story in West Virginia." They went even farther in suggesting probabilities. Having failed in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia to turn up any biographical material for Henry as a real person, they concluded that he was "most probably a mythical character."<sup>32</sup>)

Their fabulous John Henry apparently did not satisfy Dr. Johnson very long. The following year, after seeing the report of my investigations at Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in West Virginia,<sup>33</sup>) he renewed his inquiries, culminating in a change of heart about where to look for the hero and a shift in point of view. "All in all," he writes, on the strength of this new information, "John Henry and Big Bend Tunnel are so intimately connected that ... there, if anywhere ... we must look for the origin of the John Henry tradition;"<sup>34</sup>) and prefers "to believe that (1) there was a Negro steel driver named John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel, that (2) he competed with a steam drill in a contest of the practicability of the device, and that (3) he probably died soon after the contest."<sup>35</sup>)

<sup>29</sup>) Folk-Songs du Midi des États-Unis, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup>) R. W. Gordon. New York Times, June 5, 1927.

<sup>31</sup>) American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 189 ff.

<sup>32</sup>) Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson. Negro Workaday Songs, p. 221 ff.

<sup>33</sup>) In September, 1925, I investigated John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel, and in February, 1927, a 19-page report of my work there fell into the hands of Dr. Johnson. I had written the report to preserve my priority claims until I could complete a larger plan of investigation on the subject, and was trying to get it published at the University of North Carolina. The following is Dr. Johnson's only acknowledgement: "I wonder to what extent collectors have made John Henry famous at Big Bend! I know of at least two others who were trailing John Henry there before I made my visit." John Henry, p. 34 (n). It would be interesting to know the other culprit.

<sup>34</sup>) John Henry, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup>) Ibid., p. 54.



In taking this new point of view, however, Dr. Johnson, in 1929, says that he began in February, 1926, "to pursue the idea that the Big Bend Tunnel was the place of origin of the John Henry tradition."<sup>36</sup> What he means by the expression "to pursue the idea" is not altogether clear, but his treatment of John Henry as a myth from investigations elsewhere as already shown, and his statement at the time, several months after February, 1926, are clear enough:

Prof. J. H. Cox traces John Henry to a real person, John Hardy, a Negro who had a reputation in West Virginia as a steel driver and who was hanged for murder in 1894. We are inclined to believe that John Henry was of separate origin and has become mixed with the John Hardy story in West Virginia<sup>37</sup>).

If he began several months before publishing this statement "to pursue the idea" that the John Henry tradition originated at Big Bend Tunnel, why did he offer no objection to Dr. Cox's treatment of Hardy as the famous steel-driver there? He knew that Dr. Cox in taking over the Henry tradition for Hardy had taken over Big Bend Tunnel, and that he had treated Hardy as the famous steel-driver in building it. The answer of Dr. Johnson is that he was "inclined to believe that John Henry was of separate origin and has become mixed with the John Hardy story in West Virginia". In this connection, moreover, he fails to take West Virginia into account in his schedule for another investigator:

We have found a few Negroes who were not clear in their minds about Booker T. Washington, but we have found none in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia who had not heard something some time about John Henry. In other places, however, in Mississippi and Maryland, for instance, we understand he is not so well known. To trace the story of the ballad to its origin is a difficult task and one awaiting the folklorist<sup>38</sup>).

He leaves Big Bend to Hardy and the question of origin of the Henry tradition to the folklorist, several months after February, 1926, and these concessions characterize his efforts "to pursue the idea" that the tradition originated in West Virginia until he saw my report from the tunnel.

His marvellous freedom in handling this material would seem to call for an explanation of some sort. But his disregard of my rights is largely personal and need not require the attention of readers who are not interested in trifles, such as an investigator's priority claims may be, where I seem to follow him without reference in this study. The book he published, though, raises some questions that must be of general interest.

His "low-down" on John Henry doubtlessly should have first place, but a full appraisal of his part in the book cannot be made

<sup>36</sup>) Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>37</sup>) Negro Workaday Songs, p. 222 (n).

<sup>38</sup>) Ibid., p. 222.



here. He says that there "are undoubtedly some vulgar versions of John Henry in circulation, but none has ever fallen into my net. I can truthfully say that the following stanzas contain the only 'low-down' I have ever heard on John Henry."<sup>39</sup>) The following are his first two:

John Henry had a little woman,  
Name was Ida Red.

John Henry had a little woman,  
She sleeps in my own bed.

Old John Henry was a railroad man,  
Washed his face in the frying pan,  
Combed his head with the wagon wheel,  
Died with the toothache in his heel.

He probably regards these stanzas as late adaptations, not basically a part of the Henry tradition, and as well his third example which is much longer. He might have added at least three others of equal value from his own texts:

John Henry told his woman,  
'I've always did as I please.'  
She said, 'If you go with that other bitch,  
I will not let you see no ease.'<sup>40</sup>)

John Henry had a little woman,  
Just as pretty as she could be;  
They's just one objection I's got to her:  
She want every man she see.<sup>41</sup>)

'Where did you get your pretty little dress?  
The hat you wear so fine?'  
'Got my dress from a railroad man,  
Hat from a man in the mine.'<sup>42</sup>)

Possibly the miner and the railroad man were local merchants of a very neighborly sort, and one, if not both, of them a Santa Claus; but the hat and dress would seem to indicate at least that she was not entirely disappointed.

He adds, in this connection, his confession of faith in sex symbolism in "John Henry":

Realizing that John Henry contains excellent symbolism from the Freudian point of view, I have kept a watch for such versions, but I have never heard one. However, Prof. English Bagby, of the Department of Psychology of the University of North Carolina, tells me that he has talked to at least one Negro who definitely interpreted John Henry in terms of sexual symbolism<sup>43</sup>).

<sup>39</sup>) John Henry, p. 140 ff.

<sup>40</sup>) Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>41</sup>) Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>42</sup>) Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>43</sup>) Ibid., p. 140.

Perhaps he watched too closely to be able to evaluate objectively all that fell into his net. One of his texts contains these lines:

John Henry had a little wife  
Who were steel corn fed<sup>44</sup>).

Possibly "steel corn" means only hard corn, and he has "never heard one". The contributor, of course, is the only authority for the text, but he, like the editor, can answer only for himself, not for the other thousand singers of the same version. If the "drill", "a little piece of steel", "driving steel", and "bucking steel" have Freudian values in possible connections, as his psychologist would seem to recognize, he allows none of them such a bearing in his work.

While Dr. Johnson insists on speaking "truthfully", one may ask, in view of his handling thus such materials, how fully he realized that "John Henry contains excellent symbolism from the Freudian point of view". His answer, though it hardly seems necessary, is vigorously expressed in his review of Roark Bradford's *John Henry*, a more recent treatment of the Henry tradition:

And now Roark Bradford has written a book about John Henry --- but not the John Henry of the legend. His is a jazz version, so to speak ... The old John Henry was a tragic, almost a sacred, figure. He symbolized man versus the machine. This new John Henry is a tragic personality also, but in so far as he symbolizes anything it is man versus woman<sup>45</sup>).

Dr. Johnson had explained earlier that the word jazz deserves to head the list in Negro song for the "act of cohabitation".<sup>46</sup> One thing at a time and that done well must be the rule for his John Henry, the good man hero who did nothin' but work. A "parlor" hero of the good old days when a leg was a limb and cold hands meant a warm heart. Parson Weems denied his Washington and Marion less. That it was not necessary for John Henry, widely celebrated for half a century by the "lower" tenth of back alleys and construction camps, to borrow his sex from the upper crust requires no proof.

In handling dialect, Dr. Johnson seems equally authoritative. A sufficient illustration of his success in the field is his treatment of a "big wheel turnin'" as a "corruption of Big Bend Tunnel", with the explanation that a "common dialect pronunciation of 'tunnel' is 'turnel'".<sup>47</sup> While a "big wheel turnin'" might mark a stanza or version of the ballad as corrupt, I prefer to regard it as a substitution for "Big Bend Tunnel", without the necessity of finding a dialectal value in "turnel" for "tunnel". Nevertheless, he is able to characterize the dialect of Roark Bradford's *John Henry* as a "sort that never was on land or sea".<sup>48</sup> And he is probably right at that.

<sup>44</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>45</sup>) *The Nation*, Oct. 7, 1931.

<sup>46</sup>) *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, April, 1927.

<sup>47</sup>) *John Henry*, p. 86 (n).

<sup>48</sup>) *The Nation*, Oct. 7, 1931.

In the field of popular literature, as well, the innocence of Dr. Johnson is too evident from statements such as the following: "When John Hardy came on the scene, only a few snatches of John Henry remained in general circulation in West Virginia."<sup>49</sup>) He gives no data to show that he had made a thorough investigation of "John Henry" in that state for the last decade of the 19th century, or the occasion when "John Hardy" came on the scene. Moreover, on the basis of material in his hands at the time he might have said, without serious objection, that "John Henry" had travelled far enough to escape complete confusion with "John Hardy" when the latter ballad began its circulation in oral tradition, and that would have been sufficient for the point he apparently wanted to make, an "explanation of the mixed versions of John Hardy which Cox has found".

His statement that the "author of John Hardy ... must have been familiar with the structure of John Henry, for he cast his product in exactly the same mold",<sup>50</sup>) is made without giving any evidence that "John Hardy" had the author. The observed fact of their structural similarity hardly settles the matter of individual or multiple authorship for one or both of the ballads. If "John Henry" developed by stages, "required more time in the making",<sup>51</sup>) as he supposes, why does he find it necessary to assume the author for "John Hardy"? Does he contribute anything by such an addition, without reference, to the earlier statement, "*Les deux chansons se trouvent être d'une structure analogue*"?<sup>52</sup>) This statement allows the possibility that the two ballads derive their structural pattern from a common source, that "John Hardy" had its origin in West Virginia although when it "came on the scene, only a few snatches of John Henry remained in general circulation" in that state, or that the author of "John Henry" was familiar with the structure of "John Hardy" for he cast his product in exactly the same mold.

The separation of the two ballads is, perhaps, the best thing Dr. Johnson does in his discussion, and that is not altogether satisfactory. His materials and methods are hardly sufficient for his conclusions.

With two tunes of "John Hardy" from white people and several of "John Henry" from Negroes, he proceeds thus: "John Hardy is simple, deliberate, and puts one in mind of the conventional English ballad sung by the white mountain people. John Henry is faster, is syncopated, and is much more typically Negroid than John Hardy."<sup>53</sup>) Doubtlessly the tunes and rhythms of his examples are somewhat different, but they are drawn too largely from phonograph records, college student, and other soloists, with improvements by the editor as the following pages will show, to have much value, and

<sup>49</sup>) John Henry, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup>) Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>51</sup>) Ibid., p. 69 ff.

<sup>52</sup>) Folk-Songs du Midi des États-Unis, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup>) John Henry, pp. 66-67.

such treatment of the two ballads does not take properly into account the frequency of Negroes singing "John Hardy" and white people "John Henry", both with notable racial variations and often a mixture of the two ballads in their performances.

He publishes a tune of "John Henry" from Robert Mason, who can pick his twelve-string box "in more ways than a farmer can whip a mule",<sup>54)</sup> and another from Leon R. Harris, a rambler who has worked in "railroad grading camps from the Great Lakes to Florida and from the Atlantic to the Missouri River", who has wherever he worked "always found someone who could and would sing of John Henry", and who says, "The song is sung to many an air or tune, and hardly any two singers sing it alike."<sup>55)</sup> Such reports are significant, and show more than the possibility of weakness in conclusions based on a few unrepresentative tunes.

Dr. Johnson, moreover, agrees that "the very essence of the work song is its fluidity, its adaptability to various kinds and speeds of work", and that a "work song tune cannot be recorded with absolute accuracy".<sup>56)</sup> In his earlier discussion, he notes the inconsistency of the singer:

When the recorder thinks that he has finally succeeded in getting a phrase down correctly and asks the singer to repeat it... he often finds that the response is quite different from any previous rendition. Requests for further repetition may bring out still other variations or a return to the previous version. Again, after the notation has been made from the singing of the first stanza of a song, the collector may be chagrined to find that none of the other stanzas is sung to exactly the same tune.<sup>57)</sup>

He adds in the next paragraph even greater difficulties for the collector in recording "group singing in its native haunts":

He cannot hope to catch by ear alone all of the parts -- and there are undoubtedly six or eight of many of these songs -- that go into the making of those rare harmonies which only a group of Negro workers can produce... He must be contented with securing the leading part of the song and harmonizing it later as best he can.

These explanations seem to place accurate tunes of the two ballads beyond the reach of Dr. Johnson.

Whatever he may think about the original authorship of "John Henry" and "John Hardy", he will hardly deny that they have been through the seasoning process of group-singing, often with an exchange of units from one to the other and confusions with other songs of similar rhythmic technique, with shifts in the "six or eight" parts for different occasions, resulting in first one part and then another holding the lead. A member of such a group, or any other soloist, can take only one of these parts at a time, as in the case of his collector, and must harmonize "it later as best he can", with

<sup>54)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>55)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 ff. Cf. p. 17 ff.

<sup>56)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69 ff.

<sup>57)</sup> *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 242 ff.



the possibility of echoing the group or various groups in the several stanzas of the song. That all such soloists, or later groups, take the same leading part for their renditions is extremely doubtful. That the original "John Henry" and "John Hardy" could come through this process without modification is equally doubtful. It follows, therefore, that if one succeeds in bringing together enough examples to show tune and rhythmic differences in their survivals, they will not be sufficient for the original character of the two ballads, and cannot establish their separation.

Furthermore, their original separation on the basis of current tune variations ignores too much ballad tradition. If the author of "John Hardy", as Dr. Johnson insists, was familiar with the structure of "John Henry" and cast his product in exactly the same mold, in all probability he copied his "John Henry" tune also, or rather that of his pattern. Possibly the author was one of a large group of ballad-singers who recognize only one tune for their entire repertory. Possibly the author, or some singer, transmitted the ballad as a "ballet" without tune notation, and all extant versions derive from this source. These are possibilities.

Weaknesses along such lines in the material on which Dr. Johnson bases his separation of "John Henry" from "John Hardy" place his thesis in an unfavorable light, and no great improvement of his case can be made from an examination of his tunes themselves. That they do not represent the full character of the two ballads requires no further explanation. His methods, though, of obtaining them have an importance, and they are well illustrated in his example from Odell Walker, his Chapel Hill authority for "John Henry".

He presents two examples of Mr. Walker's singing the first stanza of a single version of "John Henry",<sup>58</sup> with tone and rhythmic variations, and fails to say which of the performances is the correct one. Possibly he asked for the second singing of the stanza and failed to observe that his soloist had changed drinks. Possibly he had only one rendition, and as editor harmonized "it later as best he can." Nevertheless, he gives both examples as Negroid, and uses them to show a difference between the two ballads.

In fact, he must have succeeded in getting at least three performances by Mr. Walker, as lines 3 and 4 of the three printings of the first stanza of his version show:<sup>59</sup>

'Fore he'd let the steam drill beat him down,  
Die wid his hammer in his han'.

An' befo' he'd let the steam-drill beat him down,  
Die with the hammer in his han'.

And before he'd let the steam drill beat him down  
He'd die with his hammer in his hand.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 248; John Henry, p. 100.  
<sup>59</sup> Negro Workaday Songs, pp. 248, 225; John Henry, p. 100.

Possibly these specimens, with their several tunes, are faster, more syncopated, and "much more typically Negroid" than his "John Hardy" examples from white people. Apparently he published Mr. Walker's version in two other places, with further notable variations.<sup>60</sup>) Such practices must of necessity affect the evidence drawn from his texts for any purpose.

My request, in a recent note on John Henry,<sup>61</sup>) for corrections by Dr. Johnson of a series of misrepresentations in the testimonial data he published from the Big Bend Tunnel neighborhood has had no answer, and by way of throwing some light on his methods of handling such material a few of them may be pointed out more fully. One can easily understand that the slightest variation, conscious or otherwise, in these field reports would have significant results under his system of classifying them as "positive, negative, or indifferent" testimony.<sup>62</sup>)

That of Cal Evans he presents as follows:

When the tunnel was under construction he was a youngster, not quite old enough to take part in the work. He thinks there might have been a steel driver there named John Henry, but he never saw him and could remember nothing about him except what he heard later. He stated that while the story might be true he was inclined to believe that it was not<sup>63</sup>). Dr. Johnson would have no great difficulty in classifying this report for John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel as "negative, or indifferent", but if it is to have any bearing on the connection of the steel-driver with Big Bend, and on the larger question of his reality, something more definite might be expected from Mr. Evans. One would like to know why he failed to see John Henry, what he heard later, when and where he heard it. After investigating the Henry tradition there, one would certainly ask what story Evans doubts the truth of. Does he doubt the truth of the story of John Henry driving steel in the tunnel, the story of his drilling-contest there, the story of his death as a result of the contest, or the story of his body being thrown into the big fill at the east end of the tunnel? Or does he doubt the truth of the story that Henry's ghost is still driving steel in the tunnel?

Like many of the older Negroes of the community, Cal Evans, according to his own statement and that of his wife, followed the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad into that part of the state. He was a native of Albemarle County, Virginia, worked first on the road near White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, later near Huntington, in the western part of the state, and around 1875 began cooking at the roundhouse in Hinton, eight miles from Big Bend. In 1876 he married a woman of Orange County, Virginia. They made their home

<sup>60</sup>) The Southern Workman, LVI, 159; Ebony and Topaz (ed. C. S. Johnson), p. 48. Cf. John Henry, p. 153.

<sup>61</sup>) American Speech, VI (Dec., 1930), 144 ff.

<sup>62</sup>) John Henry, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup>) Ibid., p. 37.

in Hinton, where Mr. Evans continued cooking at the roundhouse until arching the tunnel with brick was begun in the early eighties.<sup>64</sup>) Then he moved to Big Bend to cook for the workmen, and remained there. He had no opportunity, therefore, to see John Henry drive steel in building the tunnel between 1870 and 1872.

His contact with the tunnel for half a century made it possible for him to learn the stories of John Henry there, and his practice of telling them is a matter of general knowledge in the community. Although he objects to the reports of Henry's ghost driving steel in the tunnel, and of Henry's death as a result of the drilling-contest, what he really believes can be understood only through an acquaintance with the man. He is one of the Negroes at Big Bend generally known to be afraid of John Henry at night, -- not that he admits it of course, -- but this fact must not be overlooked in reporting his distrust of the ghost story, and of any other part of the tradition, such as Henry's spectacular death from the contest, which seems to him to contribute directly to it. He says that he saw, when the railroad was being double-tracked in the eighties, a human skeleton unearthed in the road bed over the big fill at the east end of the tunnel, where the dead from building the tunnel were reported to be buried at night;<sup>65</sup>) but he objects to the skeleton as that of John Henry. He accepts, however, as factual the reports of Henry working in the tunnel and his contest with the steam drill.

Verification of this explanation of Mr. Evans can be made at Big Bend with no great difficulty. W. M. White,<sup>66</sup>) a student in West Virginia University, who since he was a small boy has had a camp on Evans' place, about a hundred yards below the east portal of the tunnel, where he employs Evans to cook for him during several weeks every summer, and where he has listened for hours in the evenings to Evans' tales of John Henry, says that Mr. Evans will not go alone at night to the tunnel, and that in going at night to Talcott, a small village just above Big Bend, he paddles his boat up Greenbrier River in order to avoid contact with Henry's ghost.

Mr. Evans is much less courageous than Mr. Anderson, the Negro keeper or care-taker of the tunnel, who has what people in the neighborhood call a "pension job". On my first trip to Big Bend, in the fall of 1925, I saw Mr. Anderson pushing a wheelbarrow filled with rubbish out of the west end of the tunnel, and called to him from the embankment fifty feet above and asked if he had seen John Henry while he was on the inside. He answered, with a good Negro laugh, that he had no faith in the stories of John Henry, and advised seeing John Hedrick, the man he regarded as knowing the facts in the Henry tradition.

<sup>64</sup>) J. H. Miller says that Big Bend Tunnel caved in during March, 1883, with the result that the "railroad company was forced to arch the tunnel with brick". *History of Summers County, West Virginia*, 1908.

<sup>65</sup>) See pp. 37, 47.

<sup>66</sup>) Raleigh, W. Va.



Mr. Anderson explained how, in spite of the local fear of Henry's ghost, he had taken charge when he came there more than thirty years before. He had had his most exciting experience on walking through the tunnel soon after his arrival. About half the distance through he had heard John Henry driving steel, and had experienced some difficulty in waiting for a closer acquaintance with the steel-driver; yet he had been able to discover that what he heard was water dropping above the roof of the tunnel.<sup>67)</sup>

It soon became clear, however, that his stories of John Henry were confined to the death of the steel-driver as a result of the drilling-contest and the subsequent escapades of his ghost around the tunnel. Mr. Anderson believes that a man by the name of John Henry worked in the tunnel, and seems to think everybody else should. Like Mr. Evans, though, he was not at the tunnel while it was under construction and knows only what he has heard about the steel-driver.

As respects the Henry tradition, Evans and Anderson are both "positive" and "negative", but perhaps would cause the classifier no great trouble. They accept certain parts of the tradition as factual, and regard certain other parts as "stories". The investigator, therefore, who has a use for their beliefs about Henry must be on his guard to avoid misrepresenting them, as seems to be the case in Dr. Johnson's report of Evans' testimony.

The same explanation can hardly be made in the case of John Hedrick.<sup>68)</sup> Dr. Johnson says that Mr. Hedrick "did not work on the tunnel". The reaction of Mr. Hedrick to this statement is about what one might expect from a Confederate soldier after telling him that he was not in the Civil War. Mr. Hedrick insists that he began with the first gangs at Big Bend and stayed on the job until the tunnel was finished. He quotes Mr. Hedrick as saying, "I did not see the contest myself, but I heard the men talking about it right after it took place." He fails to say where Mr. Hedrick was at the time of the contest, or where he heard the men talking about it. And it is important to know the meaning of right after it took place". Following this expression in the testimony, Mr. Hedrick speaks in terms of years, not in terms of days or hours. Mr. Hedrick, however, claims that while the drilling-contest was taking place inside the tunnel he was "taking up timber" to be used for arching, and heard Henry "singing and driving" in the contest. Dr. Johnson is also misleading in his further statement, "Mr. Hedrick could not say whether John Henry died after the contest, although his impression was that he did not." Mr. Hedrick is quite definite on the point, and does say with emphasis that Henry did not die immediately after the drilling-contest. This is the point on which Mr. Anderson, mentioned above, refers to Mr. Hedrick as authority in disposing of the factual basis for Henry's ghost in the tunnel. If Dr. Johnson had actually interviewed Mr. Hedrick, as he seems to expect the reader to believe,

<sup>67)</sup> See p. 37.

<sup>68)</sup> John Henry, p. 40.



possibly he would have made a different report. Mr. Hedrick and his daughter's family with whom he lives in Hinton, West Virginia, claim that the interview was not held.

Dr. Johnson, of course, will have his own explanation for these discrepancies in the testimony he published from Big Bend. But he will hardly find it necessary to explain why, after quoting Neal Miller as using the word "contest" for Henry's drilling-contest, he states on the following page that Mr. Miller "never spoke of the episode as a contest, but as a test",<sup>69)</sup> or to explain the variations in his two printings of Mr. Miller's report, the third and last of the series I shall examine in this study.

The first printing of this piece of testimony is easily accessible.<sup>70)</sup> The second is as follows:

This man, known as Neal Miller, told me in plain words how he had come to the tunnel with his father at 17, how he carried water and drills for the steel drivers, how he saw John Henry every day, and, finally, all about the contest between John Henry and the steam drill.

'When the agent for the steam drill company brought the drill here,' said Mr. Miller, 'John Henry wanted to drive against it. He took a lot of pride in his work and he hated to see a machine take the work of men like him.

'Well, they decided to hold a test to get an idea of how practical the steam drill was. The test went on all day and part of the next day.

'John Henry won. He wouldn't rest enough, and he overdid. He took sick and died soon after that.'

Mr. Miller described the steam drill in detail. I made a sketch of it and later when I looked up pictures of the early steam drills, I found his description correct. I asked people about Mr. Miller's reputation, and they all said, 'If Neal Miller said anything happened, it happened.'<sup>71)</sup>

The first three quoted sentences of the second printing have no near parallels in that of the first. The fourth quoted sentence of the second is a statement of fact, and differs materially from the quoted statement of this fact in the first printing:

1st: "The test lasted over a part of two days."

2nd: "The test went on all day and part of the next day."

These are important differences in the facts stated and in the form of statement. The fifth and sixth quoted sentences of the second printing are statements of fact, and statements of these facts are quoted in the first printing; but the two printings show no similarity of form. The seventh and last sentence quoted from Mr. Miller in the second printing is also a statement of fact, but differs from the corresponding quotation of the first printing:

1st: "As well as I remember... he took sick and died from fever soon after that."

2nd: "He took sick and died soon after that."

<sup>69)</sup> John Henry, p. 42.

<sup>70)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40 ff.

<sup>71)</sup> Welch Daily News, (Feb. 22, 1930), Welch, W. Va.

The qualified statement of Henry's death "from fever" in the first becomes an unqualified statement in the second, and the cause of death is omitted.

These are notable discrepancies in two printings of the same report by the same editor. Does he mean to offer the first or the second printing as the correct testimony of Mr. Miller? Perhaps he has a third version not less correct than the other two. Until he designates the authentic one, however, nothing can be done by way of testing its keeping with the facts as Mr. Miller claims to know them.

The materials Dr. Johnson uses seem less important in his hands than his shifting point of view. In 1929 he prefers to believe in the reality of John Henry, but is "not irrevocably wedded to this position".<sup>72)</sup> In 1930, without additions to his bibliography of 1929, he is convinced of Henry's reality,<sup>73)</sup> and for his stronger position relies heavily on Mr. Miller's testimony, the only one of the series in question reproduced in this connection. In its second printing he prepares for his sweeping conclusion by the addition of new information such as John Henry "took a lot of pride in his work", "hated to see a machine take the work of men like him", and "wanted to drive against it", and by a general toning up of the report by omitting expressions such as "as well as I remember". Moreover, he changes the quoted statement, "If Neal Miller says it happened, then it must have happened",<sup>74)</sup> to a stronger one, "If Neal Miller said anything happened, it happened".

If Dr. Johnson toned up data for a stronger position when he became convinced in 1930 that Henry was real, in all probability he toned down the same data when he was "not irrevocably wedded to this position" in 1929, possibly because he was not fully divorced from his earlier spouse, his mythical John Henry of 1926.<sup>75)</sup> His misrepresentations of Evans and Hedrick weaken their testimony for Henry's reality: those only slightly affecting their evidence affect it negatively, and some of them are more than slight. He almost succeeds in taking Mr. Hedrick out of the picture, and yet the value of Mr. Hedrick's correct report is about equal to that of Mr. Miller, the man he sets off as his important witness, his "One man against the mountain of negative evidence!"<sup>76)</sup> a mountain of his own creation through manipulations under his system of classifying field reports as "positive, negative, or indifferent". After aiding all along the line toward such a consummation, he admits that one can make the evidence "lean either way".<sup>77)</sup> What was his purpose in such a method?

If one assumes that Dr. Johnson, in 1929, is masquerading in John Henry, capitalizing the wide distrust of testimonial data

<sup>72)</sup> John Henry, p. 54.

<sup>73)</sup> Welch Daily News, Welch, W. Va., Feb. 22, 1930.

<sup>74)</sup> John Henry, p. 53.

<sup>75)</sup> Negro Workaday Songs, p. 221.

<sup>76)</sup> John Henry, p. 53.

<sup>77)</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

and deliberately damning the steel-driver's reality with faint praise, he might find not a little influence of the mythical character of 1926. He would know, of course, that Dr. Johnson, before making his trip in June, 1927, had examined the report of another investigator at the tunnel, a challenge to his myth, and might find that he meant to play his trump card by publishing a report in conflict. An attempt to follow him, through an imposing line of manipulations, would lead ultimately to his testimony from Neal Miller, his "One man against a mountain of negative evidence!" Possibly he understood at least the theoretical value of a single affirmative witness on a point of disputed fact. Why, then, while joining the Talcott chorus in praises of Mr. Miller's reliability, did he destroy his testimony? Did he believe that one man could affect his relationship to his mythical spouse? When he became convinced of Henry's reality in 1930, without additions to his bibliography of 1929, did he abandon her altogether? Should one regard such implications as less obvious?

The hypothesis, at any rate, that Dr. Johnson deliberately set out to destroy the evidence for John Henry as real would possibly have to take into account his changes in "John Henry" texts, and they can have no positive bearing on the matter, other than of course in so far as they evidence his wider practices in establishing a thesis. And, unfortunately, his earlier "objective studies" show the same cultural practices as regards first-hand materials. On one page in the first part of the book in which he created his mythical John Henry, he offers the following lines brought more nearly up to date:

Goin' 'way to leave you, ain't comin' back no mo',  
You treated me so dirty, ain't comin' back no mo'.

Where was you las' Sattaday night, <sup>78)</sup>  
When I lay sick in bed?

He adds as source "songs gathered two decades ago" and published in another volume:

For I goin' 'way to leave you, ain't comin' back no mo';  
You treated me so dirty, ain't comin' back no mo'.

Where were you las' Saturday night, <sup>79)</sup>  
When I lay sick in my bed?

These improved specimens, faster, syncopated, and "much more typically Negroid", suggest what one might find in his work if he had continued to be equally specific as to his sources. It would be interesting to know just what his collection was before his first publication.

More recently, however, he says, in a review of Roark Bradford's *John Henry*: "one rather hates to see one's favorite American ballad and legend sprout more new variants between the covers of

<sup>78)</sup> *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 20.

<sup>79)</sup> *The Negro and His Songs*, pp. 184, 185.



one novel than it would in fifty years of normal folk growth."<sup>80</sup>) What conclusion, then, does Dr. Johnson expect from a review of his own work? At least the name John Henry in version A of Dr. Cox's "John Hardy" should not have caused him the trouble of an inquiry.<sup>81</sup>)

The methods of Dr. Johnson seem clear enough, and one need not urge an ulterior purpose on his part. That set forth in his preface to John Henry will take care of his work: "I conceive my mission to be to bring together and co-ordinate as much actual folk material as possible." That his apparatus, as set up for such a purpose, is not sufficient for handling historical evidence is too obvious, and one need not ask how much of his collection he regards as "actual folk material". One need not emphasize his failure to distinguish between folk materials and direct or first-hand testimonial data. His desire, perhaps, to avoid dullness should be taken into account. He states in his preface that he is "not one of those who believe that folklore studies must be dull in order to be scientific". Yet he can hardly maintain that his methods are scientific.

He renewed his investigations in 1927, with the question: "Is this John Henry tradition true? I do not consider this question of any great importance."<sup>82</sup>) In 1929 he concluded that the "question of whether the John Henry legend rests on a factual basis is after all not of much significance".<sup>83</sup>) This position is about what one might expect after examining his methods, and ample characterization of his efforts in dealing with evidence for the existence of John Henry. Why he steps aside to exploit such evidence when he knows that it is already in the hands of another investigator is less certain. Whatever his full purpose may be, his manipulations have not destroyed the evidence of Henry's connection with Big Bend Tunnel, and the larger matter of Henry's reality.

At all events, in discussing the John Henry tradition Dr. Johnson is identified with two points of view, the mythical of Georgia and the Carolinas and the factual of Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia. The former he shares with Dr. Odum, and while ostensibly in the act of abandoning it welcomes Carl Sandburg to their camp.<sup>84</sup>) The latter, and the material for it, he seems to regard as his own property, and with marvellous liberality by way of invitations to other researchers, and analyses for their guidance, has handled it with great humility, and to the satisfaction of everybody.<sup>85</sup>) When all is said and done, however, I must insist that he "doth but mistake the truth totally."

<sup>80</sup>) *The Nation*, Oct. 7, 1931.

<sup>81</sup>) *John Henry*, p. 66 (n). He quotes on the preceding page three stanzas of Dr. Cox's A, with five improvements.

<sup>82</sup>) *Ebony and Topaz* (ed. C. S. Johnson), p. 50.

<sup>83</sup>) *John Henry*, p. 54.

<sup>84</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 6 ff.

<sup>85</sup>) O. H. Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition*. Cf. Louise Pound, *Journal*, XLIII, 126 ff. L. C. Wimberly, *Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany*, 1930, p. 413 ff.



My purpose is to throw more light on the John Henry tradition. It has already had sufficient attention as a sacred thing. I shall take into account its greater variety and wider diffusion, and present a larger body of material showing its connections with Big Bend Tunnel. Dr. Johnson has taken care of its purely negative aspects in that locality, and I can confine myself mainly to the other side without undue regard for people who never saw or heard of the steel-driver. He will appear in this work as a human being, superior of course but not without the common frailties of mankind.



# THE JOHN HENRY TRADITION

The John Henry tradition is widely diffused and belongs to the folk, to the lower tenth, to bums or gods as the reader may like. He may prefer variety, or intensity. The tradition is something of an index to both, smacks of the luxuriously elemental, a prodigious reality, an articulation of what millions of toilers struggle to express, on and off, in and out, by day and by night. It is not a tale, a ballad, a song: it is all of these and more, a living thing, and as such cannot be fully presented. "John Henry", now available in nearly a hundred variants,<sup>1)</sup> is the best expression of the tradition.

Mr. Brown,<sup>2)</sup> who contributes a text of the ballad, writes from Shanghai, China, that he has heard it in many places:

I've heard the song in a thousand different places, nigger extra gangs, hoboes of all kinds, coal miners and furnace men, river and wharf rats, beach combers and sailors, harvest hands and timber men. Some of them drunk and some sober. It is scattered over all the states and some places on the outside. I have heard any number of verses cribbed bodily from some other song or improvised to suit the occasion...

The opinion among hoboes, section men and others who sing the song is that John Henry was a negro, 'a coal black man' a partly forgotten verse says, 'a big fellow' an old hobo once said. He claimed to have known him but was crying drunk on 'Dago Red', so I'm discounting everything he said. I have met very few who claim to have known him.

There was a giant yellow negro with only one arm who helped to put the Tennessee Central through the mountains between Nashville and Rockwood, Tennessee. His name was John Henry and his thumb was said to be as large as an ordinary man's wrist. He could pick up a length of the steel they were laying, straighten up, turn himself completely around, still holding the rail, and lower it back into place.<sup>3)</sup> I am not claiming this fellow as the original John Henry. He wasn't anything above the ordinary with a hammer.

This report shows more than a wide diffusion of the Henry tradition; it shows something of its character, and raises the question, Who was John Henry? with a possible answer in a "coal black man", a "big fellow", or a "giant yellow negro".

The account, however, of the "giant yellow negro" alone offers something definite for a test on this score, but he was a lifter, not

<sup>1)</sup> See Appendix and Bibliography.

<sup>2)</sup> N. A. Brown, of the U. S. S. Pittsburgh.

<sup>3)</sup> Not an impossible task for a superman, provided the rail was a "60 or 70" not a "100 or 105", but this man would have difficulty in balancing.

a steel-driver. The large number of strong men, in one way or another connected with the Henry tradition, hardly justifies even considering this fellow as the original John Henry. He is more like the "strong man John Henry, colored", of Tallega, Kentucky, as characterized by common report. "This John Henry it was said carried three large hewn railroad ties at a time in loading freight cars. He also carried a barrel of coal oil, boxes of dry salt bacon and barrels of salt."<sup>4</sup>) The record fails to say how many arms this strong man had.

Newton Redwine reports another John Henry of that region, a smaller man in some respects:

John Henry the steel driving champion was a native of Alabama and from near Bessemer or Blackton. This is no doubt the man in question as he died when I was just a boy and I have heard my uncle tell of his exploits a number of times. The steel driver was between the ages of 45 and 50 years and weighed about 155 pounds. He was not a real black man, but more of a chocolate color. He was straight and well muscled.

For several years John Henry worked around the iron mining region of Alabama. Later he became a steel driver and worked on the Western & Atlantic, now the N. C. & St. L., also on the Memphis & Charleston, now the Southern from Memphis to Sallsbury, N. C. His fame as a steel driver grew each year and he was in great demand on every construction job and drove steel on practically every road under construction during his day. The Queen & Crescent was his last job.

He was well known to all the old contractors and when he had finished a job he would walk thru the mountains to another, if he had the time. He finally landed at the Kings Mountain tunnel on the route between Danville, Ky., and Oakdale, Tenn., where he worked until his death. He drove steel for four years for the Cincinnati Southern...

John Henry drove steel with a ten pound sheep-nose hammer with a regular size switch handle four feet long. This handle was made slim from where the hammer fitted on to a few inches back where it reduced to one half inch in thickness, the width being five eights in this slim part. It was kept greased with tallow to keep it limber and flexible, so as not to jar the hands and arms.

He would stand from five and one half feet to six feet from his steel and strike with full length of his hammer. The handle was so limber that when it was held out straight the hammer would hang nearly half way down. He drove steel from his left shoulder and would make a stroke of more than nineteen and one half feet spending his power with all his might making the hammer travel with the speed of lightning. He would throw his hammer over his shoulder and nearly the full length of the handle would be down his back with the hammer against his legs just below his knees. He would drive ten long hours with a never turning stroke. ... John Henry could stand on two powder cans and drive a drill straight up equally as fast as he could drive it straight down -- with the

<sup>4</sup>) The Beattyville Enterprise (a weekly), Beattyville, Ky., Jan. 4, 1929.



same long sweep and rapidity of the hammer. He could stand on a powder can with feet together, toes even and drive all day never missing a stroke. He was the steel driving champion of the country and his record has never been equalled.

There was a white man brought from some point near South Pittsburgh, Tennessee, to work in the Kings Mountain tunnel who was a good steel driver. I think his name was Duffin. They drove steel in the tunnel heading together. They were so far under the mountain that the air was bad and stale. John Henry thought the Tennessee man would drive his hole down first and became fatigued and fell. His last words were 'Give me a cool drink of water before I die'. This was before the completion of the tunnel. He was buried not far from the South end of the tunnel. My Uncle Solomon Archilus Knox worked with him for two and one half years. This is what I have personally heard from my uncle and other old men who worked there. The best I remember it was about 1880 when John Henry died...<sup>5)</sup>

At this point the account turns to the history of steam drills, with the statement, "At that time there were no steam drills ... not an air or steam drill dependable and servicable for nearly thirty years after John Henry's death" about 1880. Mr. Redwine should have examined Drinker's work on steam drills and tunnelling,<sup>6)</sup> published in 1878, for an account of the steam drill as a mechanical triumph long before that date, with its subsequent use in building tunnels in Kentucky. The line "Give me a cool drink of water before I die" is found in several versions of "John Henry", which is the chronicle of the drilling-contest between John Henry and the steam drill, and which is connected with a different tunnel as this study will show.

Although the greater part of this report, showing probably an adaptation or localization from the Henry tradition, with the heroic workman either real or imaginary as in the case of others already mentioned, seems nearer fiction than fact,<sup>7)</sup> Mr. Redwine has the support of a wide belief in a John Henry of that region. Mr. Washington,<sup>8)</sup> writing from Florida, says: "John Henry was a colored man, and I was told by my grandfather that he was born in an old log house out a little ways from Mobile, Alabama, and that is the state where he did most of his steel driving, also Tennessee." Mr. Miller,<sup>9)</sup> of West Virginia, adds: "My grandfather knew John Henry personally.

<sup>5)</sup> Ibid., Feb. 1, 1929.

<sup>6)</sup> Henry S. Drinker. *Tunnelling, Explosive Compounds, and Rock Drills*. This work is referred to below as *Tunnelling*.

<sup>7)</sup> While Mr. Redwine's account of the steel-driver seems a little too much of the good thing, it is what might be called legitimate fiction, if not something better, and much nearer correct as a picture than the Paul Kroesen drawing of his hammer and manner of using it "made from descriptions of the weird contest given to Johnson by an eyewitness." No steel-driver ever handled his hammer in the style of this drawing. *Welch Daily News*, Welch, W. Va., Feb. 22, 1930. For another marvel of art, see the "Kewpie" artist's John Henry in the *Cosmopolitan*, Jan., 1931.

<sup>8)</sup> J. W. Washington, Fort Myers, Fla.

<sup>9)</sup> Earl Miller, Hamlin, W. Va.



He was a negro from Tennessee. The last time he heard of him he was a steel driver somewhere in Kentucky."

Another contributor, Mr. Wallace,<sup>10)</sup> testifies to the sort of experience that qualifies him to speak with authority on the Henry vogue:

I am a steam shovel operator or 'runner', and have heard steel drivers sing John Henry all my life, and there are probably lots of verses I never heard as it used to be that every new steel driving 'nigger' had a new verse to John Henry.

I never personally knew John Henry, but I have talked to lots of old timers who did. I have been told by some old Rail Road construction men that John Henry and John Hardy were the same man and by some others that they were not, but I believe that John Hardy was his real name. He actually worked on the C & O Ry. for Langhorn & Langhorn and was able to drive 9 feet of steel faster than the steam drill could in Big Bend Tunnel. Then later he was hanged in Welch, W. Va., for murdering a man. After shifting out the 'chaff' think I can assure you the above is correct.

I have heard the two songs sung mostly in the same section of the country that is, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, seldom elsewhere except by men from one of the above states. I have worked all over the South, South West, and West, and have heard the John Henry song almost ever since I could remember, and it was an old song the first I ever remember of it...

This shift of the drilling-contest to Big Bend Tunnel satisfies the ballad account of the event, but the belief in Henry and Hardy as the same man starts something else. The report, however, is purely a popular one, and it seems that the Langhorn construction company had their first contract on the road near Big Bend Tunnel in 1894,<sup>11)</sup> about a quarter of a century too late for the origin of the tradition in the construction of the tunnel. Earl Smith,<sup>12)</sup> who contributes a version of "John Hardy", indicates that Mr. Wallace is not alone in identifying Henry as Hardy: "I think you will find John Hardy and Henry the same man, under different names."

Objections to this identification of John Henry are too numerous to be included in this work. A good example of them is that of Miss Hayes,<sup>13)</sup> of Kentucky: "I am telling you all I know about John Henry. He was a negro from the state of Virginia. He was not related to John Hardy. He could lift a four ton car lift so much that his feet would go in the ground up to his ankles. He was killed in the C. & O. tunnel." Miss Hayes has probably confused the steel-driver of Virginia with one of the lifters of Kentucky or Tennessee.

<sup>10)</sup> C. J. Wallace, Charleston, W. Va.

<sup>11)</sup> G. L. Scott, Talcott, W. Va., states that he furnished the Langhorns timber for a construction job on the road near the east end of Big Bend in 1894.

<sup>12)</sup> Of Gates, W. Va.

<sup>13)</sup> Isabell Hayes, Langley, Ky.

An example equally typical is that of C. H. Board<sup>14)</sup> of Virginia: "John Henry was a black man. He was not related to John Hardy. Him and Milton Brooks was little related. He was from the state of South Carolina. He died driving steel."

The confusion of John Hardy with John Henry is one of the problems in the Henry tradition. How well he measures up to the popular character of John Henry can be easily shown.

Lee Holley, of Tazewell, Virginia, who claimed to be 67 years old when he made his report in 1925, offers a strong objection to such an identification, an objection with a kick:

I've lived 'round here all my life. I've been acquainted with the camps in this section forty or fifty years. I remember seeing John Hardy pretty often, and know all about him.

He was black and tall, and would weigh about 200 pounds, and was 27 or 8 when he was hung at Welch over in McDowell County. He was with a gang of gamblers 'round the camps. Harry Christian, Lewis Rhodes, Copper Boots, and Ben Red, and Jim Mason, and others besides were all about as bad as he was. They were all loafers and gamblers, and robbed the camps at night often after pay-day. Harry Christian was hung for killing Bill Crowe, and most of the gang got killed sooner or later.

My Cousin Bob Holley drove steel with John Henry in Big Bend Tunnel. John Henry was the famous steel-driver there in building that tunnel. I heard Bob talk about him several times, but Bob's dead now. He's been dead ten years. I know John Hardy didn't drive steel in Big Bend Tunnel; he couldn't because he wasn't old enough when it was built, and he didn't work anyway. He got his living gambling and robbing 'round the camps.

That this account of Hardy is in the main correct is shown by newspaper records from that section on the occasion of his execution, January 19, 1894, for the "cold blooded" murder of Thomas Drews, also colored, at Shawnee Camp, near Eckman, McDowell County, West Virginia, early in 1893. His conviction followed on October 12th of that year. The hanging took place in sight of the jail in Welch, and his body was buried near the spot.<sup>15)</sup> Who Hardy was, or where he was from, is not known.

The real and popular personality of Hardy, as it appears in his documentary, testimonial, and ballad record, is that of an outlaw and robber, the Negro desperado around the construction camps of southern West Virginia near the close of the 19th century, and has very little in common with that of Henry, the heroic workman. Their confusion in oral tradition is hardly a phenomenal matter; the surprising thing

<sup>14)</sup> Montea, Va.

<sup>15)</sup> *Wheeling Daily Register*, Wheeling, W. Va., Oct. 13, 1893; Jan. 20, 1894. The later reference explains why Hardy killed Drews, in a disagreement over a crap game: "Both were enamored of the same woman, and the latter proving the more favored lover, incurred Hardy's envy, who seized the pretext of falling out in the game to work vengeance on Drews."

is that for a while ballad scholars found occasion to add to this confusion.<sup>16)</sup>

Mr. Redwine described his John Henry as "not a real black man, but more of a chocolate color", and introduced a white man, a superior steel-driver from Tennessee, who, he thinks, was named Duffin, and who, with the aid of bad and stale air, forced his champion to the wall. This event, real or fictitious, may have some bearing on the popular belief in John Henry as a white man from Kentucky or Tennessee.

Two reports from North Carolina are definite on the question of Henry's color. Mr. Kelley<sup>17)</sup> writes: "I have heard old men talk about John Henry that knew him. He was born in Tennessee and was a white man. His steel driving buddy was Ben Turner.<sup>18)</sup> But where he worked I don't know." Mr. Webster<sup>19)</sup> adds: "The contest between John Henry and the steam drill took place in the Big Ben Tunnel on the C. & O. Railway ... He bet a thousand dollars that he could out do the drill, and did so, but died shortly afterwards. He was a white man." Mr. Webster fails to say where Henry got the thousand dollars.

Hazel Underwood,<sup>20)</sup> of West Virginia, reports the Henry tradition in her family:

My father has often told me about John Henry. He says he was a man of about 35 years old, strong built, had muscles was supposed to be like iron. He drilled holes in the big rock cliffs with his strong arms and his two hammers one in each hand day after day.

There is no mistake about his being a white man. Papa says his last drive was made in the big ben tunnel on New River. Father says he has heard when he was a boy all about him and learned the song when he worked in the log camps, but had forgotten it till he heard part of it on a Record we have, it is just a part of it. Mamma and Pa says they can't believe this is all.

This account has a popular ring, and somewhat less authority than that of Mr. Gregory,<sup>21)</sup> another West Virginian, who reports the "old original song of John Henry", and who claims that John Henry was a white man.

Mr. Roberts,<sup>22)</sup> of the same state, along with his account of Henry as a white man, represents him as doing something besides work:

<sup>16)</sup> See "John Hardy", *Philological Quarterly*, IX, 260 ff.  
<sup>17)</sup> J. H. Kelley, Harrisburg, N. C.

<sup>18)</sup> Is it at all probable that Joe Turner had something to do with the belief in Henry as a white man and his connections in Tennessee? See Odum and Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs*, p. 206 ff. W. C. Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*, p. 40 ff. (I fail to find that an "ideal is hinted at" in Odum and Johnson's text of "Joe Turner", or Handy's idea that in this text "Joe is supposed to have been a convict himself").

<sup>19)</sup> H. Webster, State Hospital, Morganton, N. C.  
<sup>20)</sup> Huntersville, W. Va.

<sup>21)</sup> V. E. Gregory, White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.  
<sup>22)</sup> George W. Roberts, Sweetland, W. Va.



John Henry was a white man, an American born English by birth. His weight - 240 lbs at the age of 22. The muscle of his arm was 22 inches around. Many times have I seen his woman but never John Henry personal, but have worked in the mines for years with the old Welshman that sharpened tools for him by the name of Billy McKenzie.

John Henry was a native of Virginia and did actually kill himself driving steel at the Big Ben tunnel on the C. & O. R. R. in the year of 1873. He was in the penitentiary for killing a man and the contractors got him out to drive steel. He was no relative of John Hardy at all.

I am near 70 years old, and I was a miner for a great many years in the Kanawha Valley at Paint Creek after the C. & O. was built, and that is the place I used to see John Henry's wife a little ugly freckle face woman. She would come around the mines where the work was going on.

Mr. McKenzie's widow<sup>23)</sup> says she does not remember that her husband ever spoke of Henry or his wife in her presence. The "freckle face woman", however, will appear several times in a later chapter. She has value here only as a possible influence in the belief in John Henry as a white man and a criminal.

The same belief is reported from Virginia and Kentucky. Harvy Hicks<sup>24)</sup> writes:

John Henry was a white man they say. He was a prisoner when he was driving steel in the Big Ben tunnel at that time, and he said he could beat the steam drill down. They told him if he did why they would set him free. It is said that he beat the steam drill about two minutes and a half and fell dead. He drove with a hammer in each hand, nine pound sledge...

This is a popular report, and shows for Virginia more than an individual belief in Henry as a white man with a past. That from Kentucky is somewhat different. Mr. Barnett,<sup>25)</sup> who claims a career "working on railroads and 'round the coal-mines", says that he has always heard that either Henry or Hardy was a white man and a "ruff'an" from Kentucky.

Mr. Thompson,<sup>26)</sup> a merchant, with contacts of another sort, has heard of Henry and Hardy in Tennessee:

Having been born and raised in the state of Tennessee and, therefore, in sufficiently close contact with the negro element there, it happens that I have heard these songs practically all of my life, until I left that section six years ago...

I have been informed that John Henry was a true character all right, a nigger whose vocation was driving steel during the construction of a tunnel on one of the southern railways. I heard the John Henry song long before I did John Hardy. It has always been my understanding that John Hardy was a western character, probably a train robber.

<sup>23)</sup> An elderly woman who divides her time among her children of Hinton and Montgomery, W. Va.

<sup>24)</sup> Evinston, Va.

<sup>25)</sup> W. P. Barnett, of Magoffin County Ky.

<sup>26)</sup> B. E. Thompson, Sutton, W. Va.